



Seethalakshmi—She Refused To Bend Or Break

A number of readers have been telling us that reading Manushi tends to be a depressing experience, since the magazine is full of reports of oppression, exploitation and violence against women. One way Manushi seeks to offset this depression is by highlighting the struggles of women, individual and collective. Perhaps this highlighting needs to be done with more continuity and emphasis. With this aim, we are beginning a series of interview based articles focusing primarily on the experience of two kinds of women. First, the experience of ordinary women who have, in their own varied ways, combated oppression and moved towards achieving a modicum of independence and self expression. Second, the experience of exceptional women who have been able to make a noteworthy contribution in their chosen fields, thereby exposing the lie that women are innately inferior to men, and forcing society to become more receptive to the idea of women's independence and creativity. We feel that from these two kinds of experience we can learn something about ways of discovering, creating and exploring alternatives even in an oppressive society, thus pushing the environment towards change.

We came to know Seethalakshmi in 1982 when she came to **Manushi**, after her husband, C.S. Ramalingam, had thrown her out of the house. He had refused to let her take clothes and personal belongings for her self and her child. A group of women from **Manushi** then accompanied Seethalakshmi to the house and helped her bring away her personal belongings though Ramalingam had already removed her jewellery and other valuables. When she first came, Seethalakshmi was very hesitant to speak and it was her father who did most of the talking. When we mentioned her in **Manushi** No. 13 in the article “*Ab hum jalkar nahin marengi, jeene ka adhikar lekar rahengi*” we used the pseudonym “Radha” for her at her own request. However over the last year, Seethalakshmi has acquired a new confidence, because, as she puts it, “You only know you can do a thing when you start doing it.” She has begun to define her life anew and now wishes to communicate her experience to others. We present here extracts from a taperecorded interview with Seethalakshmi, by Madhu and Ruth.

Seethalakshmi, can you tell us something about your childhood and life before marriage?

I am the third child in a family of four girls and two boys. We are Tamilians, though we have been settled in Delhi for 40 years. I was a much loved child. I was always reserved and quiet. I loved my solitude. I did not like to go out alone, and did not have many friends. Since I was happy that way, I never tried to analyse why I was like that. From childhood I had a fancy for singing. My parents are music lovers so they encouraged me to take music as a main subject. I did BA music honours for Miranda House, Delhi university, in 1974.

My father and my father-in-law C.R. Subrahmanyam, both were in government service. Both the families lived in Pandara Road government quarters. Our families knew each other and we children used to play together. When I was in the second class and Ramalingam in the fifth, he used

to come to my house, and we all knew him. But I never had a special friendship with him, because I was a very quiet child. When I started going to college, he used to see me on the road. One fine morning his parents came to my parents and said: “Our son loves your daughter. If she refuses to marry him, he won't marry at all, so please see that she is married to him.” Actually, everybody in the area knew that I was very quiet, very reserved, very soft. My in-laws must have thought that I would be a suitable girl for their son. I would not open my mouth.

At first I was not ready to marry him. But on the way to college, he started meeting me and threatening me. He used to say: “Seetha, if you don't marry me, I will write to your husband, whoever he may be, and will tell him that you were going around with me, and that we had sexual relations. I will see to it that your life is spoilt.”

Didn't you think that if he was

blackmailing you even before marriage, he would turn out to be much worse afterwards?

He said he was doing it because he loved me so much and he didn't want to lose me. At that time I did not know the world, I had not mixed with people. I thought he really must be loving me. So I thought it would perhaps be better to marry one who already loves me than to marry someone whom I love. Also if I married someone else, he would spoil my life, so it was better to marry him. I was too scared to tell my parents about his threats. My mother is very strict, and she may well have believed that I was having an affair with him.

He was not at all goodlooking, and he was earning only Rs 350 a month at that time, but I thought money and looks are not important, if a person is intelligent and loving, so I agreed to marry him. I got married in 1974, when I was 24 years old. I appeared for my final exam 10 days after

my wedding. I stood first in the university and was awarded a fellowship to do MA. I had intended to do MA but my in-laws objected so I just continued my studies. I thought they would be nice to me so I didn't want to fight with them, I didn't want to give them any provocation. I thought I would keep practising, I would attend private classes and gradually prove to them my interest in art, so that they would allow me to study further. But they never allowed me.

My elder sister had got married in 1973 and my parents had spent Rs 50,000. My father told my in-laws that it was not possible to spend Rs 50,000 again so soon, but they said: "We are not keen on money. Whatever you can do, do it." So my parents spent about Rs 25,000. The dowry included jewellery worth six sovereigns, steel utensils, costly saris. About 500 people were invited to the wedding.

How was your experience of marriage?

For a year after marriage, my husband was nice to me. Then things began to change. There were about 10 members in the family at that time. I did everything to please them. I used to get up at 4 a.m. and start to work. I had to prepare breakfast for the men who left for office at 9 a.m. They also drank tea or coffee three or four times before that. Then I had to prepare packed lunch for them to carry to office. All this took time. I never ate any breakfast. After the men left, I would start preparing food for the ladies. So I would eat only at 1.30. Sometimes, I would feel too tired to eat even then. No one bothered about me. They would call everyone for meals but they thought it would be an insult to them if I sat and ate with them. I used to serve them.

After lunch, I would begin preparing tiffin for the men who used to come home around 5.30. I had to grind the rice by hand for *dosais* or *idlis*. They had a mixer but they did not use it. They used to say: "Seetha knows what to do." So I used to do it. After 6, I would start preparing dinner. This would continue on and on and on. My husband used to say: "Let them eat. You and I will eat later." At first, he was

nice to me so I used to wait to eat with him. Afterwards this became a habit.

Also, they were in the habit of drinking everyday. They had so many guests. The number varied from day to day four or five or 10. I had to prepare food accordingly. If they were drinking, I had to sit and wait, sometimes till 11.30 or 12 at night. Then they would vomit and I would clean everything. Then I would see that they ate properly. Though they didn't bother about me, I used to feel: "This is my family."

In their house everybody drinks and moves freely with everyone. My father-in-law used to tell me:

"Seetha, you are looking beautiful, wear this sari, it looks nice on you." I never thought he had anything in his mind. I thought he was being nice to me. But in 1982 one day he said to me: "Seetha, you are so smart. Why don't you share your life with me? My son is not so smart as you are." I told my husband: "What is this happening in your family?"

You never told us this before!



In the beginning I was feeling so bad to say that my father-in-law behaved with me like this. I really feel in my heart: "Why did this happen to me?" Gradually, my mother-in-law began to change my husband. She used to tell him: "Don't be after your wife so much. She thinks she is beautiful. When you walk on the street the difference is very obvious. Don't walk with her."

He began to develop a complex. In 1975 my husband's brother got married. His wife brought 15 sovereigns, Rs 5,000 in cash and many other things. My mother-in-law started harassing me: "Why can't you go and ask your father for money?" I told her: "I am not ready to ask my father for money. It is an insult to my family and also to you. If you want money, my father has given me a good education so I can work and earn." When my son was 8 months old, I applied and got a job as a typist. I was earning Rs 350. Again my husband felt a complex. He had been working for so many years, and I was starting with the same salary as his. My mother-in-law used to tell him: "She is earning equally with you so she thinks she is all in all here." He would start shouting at me. Whenever I sat down to eat, they would say something to make me cry. They would say: "You are from a poor family. You think you are beautiful." I would get upset and would not feel like eating.

Why didn't you take better care of yourself?

I was sensitive at that time. I used to feel the insults very much. I wanted to show them that if they didn't feed me that I could live without food or by eating one meal a day. I had the stamina at that time. To harass me, my mother-in-law began to neglect my child. One day, I got irritated and said: "If you can't look after my son properly, I'm not going to do the job." Without asking their permission, I resigned the job. Whatever little cash I had saved or had got as a present from my parents at festivals was taken away from me by them.

Around 1979 my father-in-law retired. They said they could not afford to rent a big enough house for the whole family so we should live separately. I wanted to take

a two room set but my mother-in-law wanted my husband to give her half his salary every month. By this time he was earning Rs 600. So she said to me: "Seetha, we don't want you to do a job and your husband is not earning much so you must take a small place." So we had to take one room in Netaji Nagar. The kitchen was the size of a cupboard and only one person could stand in it with scarcely any space to move.

Why didn't they want you to take a job?

Because they were in the habit of coming almost every day to my house for meals. Whenever they felt like it, they would drop in and I had to keep food ready for them. Every Friday night we used to go to their house and for three days I would be busy in the kitchen. They would be drinking, going out with friends or bringing them home, and I had to keep breakfast, lunch, dinner, everything ready. If I had taken a job there would have been no one to do all this.

After my son started going to school I persuaded my husband to let me take a job so that we could save some money. Finally he agreed so I got a job, starting with Rs 600. Then my husband began to give his whole salary to his parents and I had to run the house from my salary. I used to try to save some money in my own account but whenever he saw more than Rs 1000 had accumulated there, he would buy some valuable like taperecorder, mixer, a gold chain for himself. He did not want to see any some of money in my account...

Did you ever get any physical or emotional satisfaction from this marriage?

No, never. He was very sexy, he wanted sex everyday. Whenever I was tired or sick or had fever, he was not bothered. If he wanted it, he must have it. He always forced me. He would tell me: "You are my wife. Whatever I do, you have to take it." Right from the beginning, he was like this in bed, and this created an irritation in my mind. When I was not willing, and when he had no care for my interest or judgment, naturally I couldn't enjoy it.

What if you refused?

He would force me. When you have only one room and he is going to force, what is the fun of refusing? Even on the fourth and fifth day of menstruation he would force me. I used to give in, maybe because I thought "My life is spoilt anyway. This marriage too was forced on me by his threats. Now if I fight neither of us will be happy. If I can't enjoy, at least let him enjoy, let one of us be happy, if not both."

Even when I was eight months' pregnant he used to force me. I used to undergo very severe pain, then I went to my parents' house. Otherwise I think he would have forced me till the last day. I came back from my parents' house when Raja, my son, was five and a half months old. I came to know that in my absence my husband had started going to other women.

I used to work overtime on Saturdays because we were giving money to my in-laws. When I returned I would often find him sitting with a woman. Immediately his expression would change and he would say: "She is my friend, working with me, and she has come to meet you." After some time, I began to ask: "How is it that everyone comes to see me particularly only on Saturday when I'm not at home?" When I started questioning him like this, he would slap me or he would walk out of the house and not come back for two or three days.

What gave you the strength to go on putting up with his misbehavior?

At that time, two of my sisters and two of his brothers were unmarried. I thought that if I quarreled with him or walked out of the house, it would affect the marriage chances of my sisters, and that would create a problem for my parents. It might even affect his brothers' marriage chances. I did not want anyone to suffer because of me. In 1980 both my sisters got married and so did his brothers. After this I started questioning him. I thought: "Now whatever I do, it won't affect anyone else. Only I will have to face the consequences, good or bad." So I became bolder and began to resist his behavior.

How is it he did not improve even after

you started staying separately from his parents?

He could have improved if I had got some money from my father. But I said I would rather die than go to my parents for money.

He used to drink every day with his friends. I used to go out of the room. But I used to give him a daily lecture. For hours together I would keep talking, telling him that what he was doing was wrong, and it would have a bad affect on his health and on our son. Sometimes he would listen, sometimes he would go to sleep and like a mad woman, I would keep on talking.

Then I started demanding to know how much he was earning. He had got promotions and I heard that he was earning about Rs 1,500 but he never told me about any of this. He was giving this extra money to his parents or spending it on drink. I asked him: "What are you doing with the money? I must know. Eight years is a long time. For so long I have always been saying Yes to you. Now I must know how much you earn and what you do with the money."

Instead of answering, he would start beating me. He would slap me or push me into a corner. When he beat me, I never used to cry. We had only one room and my son used to be watching. He used to go mad. He would come and embrace me and say: "Mummy, what happened? Why is father beating you?" I thought that if I cried it would add to his mental depression. So I always used to control myself and finally I would say sorry to him.

You would say sorry?

Yes. That was the only way to stop him. I thought that after all he was my husband, so if by saying sorry, by being polite to him, it was possible to change him, that would be good. But he never changed. I used to tell him not to beat me because it spoilt Raja's image of him. My image was not spoilt because my son always had feelings for me. He would tell his father: "Mummy is doing so much for us. Why are you treating her like this?"

He used to beat Raja a lot too. If he lost his pencil, rubber or notebook in

school, he would beat him with a stick or iron rod. Once he even burnt him with a cigarette lighter. All this made Raja hate his father. If his father wanted to take him out, he would say: "When Mummy comes, I will go. Otherwise I don't want to go."

Once, my husband had stayed away from home for three days. Then he came at 2.30 at night and knocked at the door. I opened, and he said: "Seetha, somebody is in the taxi downstairs. Go say hello to him and shake hands with him. I don't mind if you go with him for the night." When he said this I slapped him, I really slapped him, and I said: "If you have such ideas in



your mind, you can walk out. I have lived for three days without you, I can live without you for ever."

Later I indirectly told my mother-in-law about it. She said: "Whatever he tells you to do, your duty as an Indian wife is to do it."

I was ready to adjust over everything. For years, I danced to the tune of his wish. I always said yes to him. I used to be very soft to him when he was in extreme moods. When they didn't give me proper food or clothes I didn't complain. I was prepared to adjust over such matters. But I feel more for my character than for money. When they said to me: "You can earn Rs 1,000 a night, why do you want to work for Rs 800 a month?" I was not ready to do it. When

people used to come and drink in our room, I used to go and sit in the verandah or in my sister's house which was next door. At night when they left I would go in. Sometimes he used to get angry and lock the door. He was angry because he was losing Rs 1,000 by my not agreeing to go out with his friends. Then I would sleep in the verandah outside. The next day he would let me in because after all he needed my income and also needed me to cook. This is how life was continuing.

How did it happen that you left the house?

On July 8, 1982, as usual I went to

office. I had to convey a message to my husband so I rang him up in his office. I was told that he was absent. I was surprised because in the morning he had got ready as usual and left for office. When I came home in the evening he was sitting and drinking with a woman. Raja was standing outside. I asked: "Raja, have you had your milk or something to eat?" He said: "No." I went in but did not speak then because I didn't want to insult him in front of a third person. After 15 minutes the woman left, then I asked: "Where were you the whole day?" He said: "In the office." I said: "Don't tell a lie. You were not in the office in the afternoon. Where were you?" He got angry and shouted: "Who are you to ring me up in the office?"

I said: "I am your wife. Today I must know what you are up to. At least you could have given milk to Raja. He is starving outside and you are enjoying drinks. I am not ready to adjust with you like this. Why can't you adjust with me when I'm doing so much, am earning for you and your family?"

Then he started beating me up. "Who are you to give me this lecture? You are not bringing money from your father. Whatever I spend on drink is my own money so you are nobody to question me." He beat me a lot. Then I also slapped him. Even today I don't regret that. I think that at least once I did a right thing. He said: "If you want to stay here, you have to adjust with me. You have to go out with anyone I tell you to. If you are ready to go out with a person tonight, then come in. Otherwise, get out." So I had to come away to my parents' place.

Did your parents know all that was happening to you?

No, I had never told them. Only a month or two before I left, I told them something. My sister had heard my husband shouting at me and she had given some information to my parents. But I used to keep quiet. Since I never thought of coming out, I thought there was no point spoiling my reputation. Also, I was hardly allowed to meet my parents. I used to visit them once or twice a year. Even then, my husband or my mother-in-law would always accompany me so I could not talk freely. Even if I happened to see my parents on the road, I could not speak to them. I would just wave my hand. Even to talk to my sister who lived next door, I had to take his permission. He used to watch me all the time. Once my father had tried to advise him not to drink, but he retorted: "You are nobody to advise me. You are welcome to take away your daughter anytime you like." So my father kept quiet because he did not want to disturb my life.

After I went home, my father said: "Be polite. Don't take an arrogant step. Marriage is not so easily breakable. We will try to patch up matters with your in-

laws. "I waited and many times my father and brother went to speak to them. But they said: "She should act according to her husband's wishes. She is beautiful and has the stamina. What is wrong if she goes out with people?" Then my father felt very bad.

Why did you want to keep the child with you?

Because the child is mine. I am a mother and I want my child. One fine morning I got a summons from the court saying that my husband had filed a case for custody of the child. In reply, on the advice of my lawyer, I filed a suit for divorce on grounds of cruelty. I feel they have sued for custody



just to harass me. They think I cannot live without Raja so if they take him, automatically I will go and fall at their feet.

You don't think a father is necessary for the healthy upbringing of the child?

I don't know, in general. In my case, I know my husband can never bring up a child. He doesn't know what love and affection is. Without love and affection it's not possible to bring up a child. Even when we were together if Raja wanted anything he would always come to me, not to his father. He never says that he misses his father. Even in general, I think, by nature only a woman can give proper love and affection to children.

How did you decide to take up music again?

Well the first thing is that my in-laws are not with me. There is no one to stop me now. I met a friend who told me about Gandharva Mahavidyalaya so I decided to do MA in music. I spoke to my managing director and asked for permission to take an extra half hour off, before and after lunch break, three times a week. He was very nice and understanding. So now I go to college from office, take my lesson and then go back to office. I don't get time to practise in the formal way, by sitting with a tanpura, but one track of my mind is always busy with music. Even on the road or in the bus, whenever I get five minutes to myself, I hum the tune and try what improvisations I can do, or go over what I have learnt. I feel very involved with music.

How did you manage to kill that involvement for eight years?

Well, after my marriage I did give a couple of public performances in temples and in college on festive occasions. My in-laws did not like it that I was praised by everyone while their daughter did not know how to sing. Also, they did not want me to study further because my husband was only BA and if I did MA I would be more educated than he was. They also forbade me to sing in public or to practise at home. They used to say: "This is not a prostitute's house. We do not want any singing here." I did not want to bring unhappiness in the family just because of my singing. After all, I was singing for my own satisfaction. I did not need an audience. I used to sing when they had gone out or when I was in the bathroom. Nobody could come and stop my mouth.

How do you see your future?

I see it as very bright, very happy. I would like to study further, do M Phil and PhD in music, and teach music, make it more popular. I want to give most of my life to music. Music really gives pleasure and peace. I think there is no need to sit and do *puja* or go to the temple as people normally do. Music itself is *puja*. If you don't harm anyone, if you don't think of

doing harm to humanity, that is *puja*. The more you learn music, the more your mind becomes pure. You become soft. I am soft natured. I love music so I thought I would dedicate my life to music.

Do you feel surprised at the change you have undergone in the last year?

When you start doing something, only then do you know what you can do. I stayed alone for a year and I'm not facing any problem. So I think I can manage my life without him. I think when a problem comes, automatically you get the strength also. The more you see people, you face the problem, you gain experience out of your everyday life.

How do you find your life now?

I find my life very happy, very enjoyable. Now there is no one to disturb me or depress me mentally. I do not daily see someone drinking and forcing me to do something, saying all the time: "You are my wife, you have to do this." Now when I feel like doing a thing, I do it. If I don't feel like doing it, I don't do it. Now I'm living for myself. I have started doing whatever I want to do, in my life. For eight years I lived under the domination of others. I was forced to do things that I did not want to do. I feel I am living a healthier life, physically and mentally, without my husband. Now I'm living every minute for myself.

Not for your son?

Not that I am not living for my son. But I am not sure whether my son will be with me or he will go. I don't mind if at a later stage he wants to go and live with my husband. Only at this initial stage I want him to be with me because I know they won't give him proper education. Their family gives more importance to earning money in the easiest, quickest way rather than to education. I want to give my son a good education and also to encourage him in any field in which he shows interest. I would like him to learn music. He sits near me when I practise and I also buy cassettes for him. He is interested in painting so I buy paints for him. I want him to learn everything, do everything he wants to do. I don't want to force him into anything,

because by force one can never learn anything. He has got every right to decide his own life. But at this stage he should be with me. I don't want to depend on him. I don't want to depend on anyone for that matter.

You don't think you will feel lonely in old age?

No. From the beginning I loved my solitude. I have always been reserved. Now music is with me, so I don't think I can ever feel lonely. I don't think I will ever miss having what I had.

How do your parents react to your life?

My mother felt bad because she is more bothered about what people will say. Now I don't bother. I think if people are barking, let them bark. I don't care. My father understands me very well. He says: "Seetha, it's your life. You have full right to live for yourself. You are the better judge for your life. Whatever you feel like doing, do it." My parents never interfere with me. Now I don't have to cook either. Not that I dislike cooking but I think music is more interesting. Maybe because I was doing cooking from 4 in the morning to 12 at night for eight years, so now for a change I don't mind if my mother cooks and feeds me, and I can sit and sing, and feel nice and bright and happy!

Do your colleagues know about your life?

At first they did not know. At a later stage when I used to go to office with a reddish and swollen face, after being beaten up, I told a few colleagues who were close to me. They were very supportive and encouraged me to build my life anew. Some of them are giving evidence in court on my behalf.

Would you like to remarry?

I don't know. Just now I don't feel the need but I can't say what may happen in the future. Also, anyone I marry has to be ready to keep my son. Both the families will have to accept the idea of a remarriage. And what if he says that he is ready to keep my son, and later he changes his mind? Men can change at any time. They are not like women. So I have to think twice before getting remarried.

How did you decide to speak openly, using your own name, in Manushi?

I think in the beginning if someone had asked me to do this, I would never have agreed. But once you start doing a thing, you gain more experience and confidence in doing it. In this one year I have achieved more confidence in what I am doing. Now I want to come forward. I want my in-laws to realize that I am not as voiceless and submissive as they thought I was. My in-laws have been going to every corner of Delhi and talking to people, telling them that I left the house for no reason. They have tried to spoil my image in public. Now I think there's nothing wrong if I also speak openly. Maybe by reading this, other women too will get confidence to speak more openly.

Do you think your problem was a peculiar one or a common one?

I think the problem is common. Some women are able to take steps to overcome it. Because I am a working woman I can earn for myself. Otherwise I would have had to depend on my husband and I don't think I could have come out of the house. Earning is the most important thing.

How do you think things will change for women?

Women should not think: "If we do something against men, people will talk against us." We have to show men that we have got equal rights. We are not doing anything wrong. We are asking for our rights. We are doing the right thing.

We should not feel that because we are women we must tolerate everything our husbands say and do. There must be give and take. If the husband is not ready for that, we have every right to leave. We can live alone. We should not depend on anyone—that's what I feel. The more you become dependent on your husband, the less able you are to take any steps. Whatever he says you have to accept it because you are dependent on him. Women should not depend on anyone. They should know how to stand on their own feet. Then the problems can be solved. Don't you think so? □